

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks on the Observance of National Poetry Month

April 17, 2015

Thank you. Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, first of all, let me thank Madeleine for the wonderful introduction. [*Laughter*] And Madeleine is going to be going to Princeton next year, so her and Michelle were exchanging how special they were, backstage. [*Laughter*] And you know, "President" is a cool title, but "former teen poet"—[*laughter*—that is a pretty good title as well. And I'm proud to be both. I have to say my poems are not as good as yours, Madeleine. But I was going to recite some poetry, but Michelle said no. [*Laughter*] She said, don't do that. [*Laughter*] No.

Anyway, April is National Poetry Month. So Michelle and I figured what better way to celebrate than with some of America's brilliant young poets. And we've invited poetry fans of all ages to join us as well. And we have one of America's most gifted and accomplished poets, my dear friend, Elizabeth Alexander, who's going to share some of work with us. So I'm not going to speak long.

Poetry matters. Poetry—like all art—gives shape and texture and depth of meaning to our lives. It helps us know the world. It helps us understand ourselves. It helps us understand others: their struggles, their joys, the ways that they see the world. It helps us connect. In the beginning, there was the word. And I think it's fair to say that if we didn't have poetry, that this would be a pretty barren world. In fact, it's not clear that we would survive without poetry. As Elizabeth once wrote, "We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, words to consider, reconsider." That's the power of poetry.

Sometimes, it's only after reading a poem or writing a poem that we understand something that we already went through, that we felt, that we experienced. And that's why we often reach for poetry in the big moments: when we fall in love or lose somebody close to us or leave behind one stage of life and enter into another. A good poem can make hard times a little easier to survive and make good times a lot sweeter.

But poetry does not just matter to us as individuals, it matters to us as a people. The greatness of a country is not just the size of its military or the size of its economy or how much territory it controls. It's also measured by the richness of its culture. And America is America in part because of our poets and our artists and our musicians, all those who have shared their ideas and their stories and helped make us the vibrant and passionate and beautiful country that we are today.

It's not every nation that produces poets like Elizabeth or like Madeleine. There are parts of the world where poets are censored or they are silenced. But that's not how we do it here. That's one of the many reasons why we're such a special place. If you want to understand America, then you'd better read some Walt Whitman. [*Laughter*] If you want to understand America, you need to know Langston Hughes. Or it—otherwise, you're missing something fundamental about who we are.

And now, for the very special poet here today. I met Elizabeth when we were professors together at the University of Chicago. She and Michelle and I have been friends ever since. So when we were planning my first Inauguration, we decided we better have a poet, and we thought we should have a poet that we know and we love. And she penned this extraordinary

poem called "Praise Song for the Day." You all should read it. On a day full of unforgettable moments, hearing Elizabeth read that poem was one of my favorite moments. And she has just written a amazing book that technically is not a poem, but is full of poetry, and I could not be prouder of her.

So congratulations to all the young poets. I look forward to reading your work or hearing your work. But right now I want to introduce Ms. Elizabeth Alexander.

[At this point, Elizabeth Alexander, Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University, made brief remarks followed by readings from her works. The First Lady then made concluding remarks.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 4 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to 2014 National Student Poet honoree Madeleine LeCesne, student, Lusher Charter School in New Orleans, LA. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady.

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